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ON MAZRUI'S "BLACK ORIENTALISM": A CAUTIONARY CRITIQUE

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"My TV series was standing on the shoulders of Pan African giants"

Ali Mazrui, "Black Orientalism?"

This is a preliminary comment which will later be followed by a more substantial commentary on Skip Gates' "Wonders of the African World". In this initial comment, I wish to take issue with the morality of Professor Ali Mazrui's hatchet job on the series. I am very reasonably assured that the series WILL get the serious, tough-minded but objective criticism which it - and any object or text of cultural production - deserves from scholars in the fields of African and African-American Studies. My assurance on this score comes from my intimate knowledge of the caliber of minds and intellects at work in these fields - for at least the last thirty years. Professor Mazrui seems unaware of, or indifferent to this fact, otherwise he couldn't have so easily and breezily substituted what he himself calls "cheap rhetoric and denunciations" for rigorous, informed criticism in his two commentaries on "Wonders of the African World." In this piece I show how Mazrui does this and I ask for critical debate that combines passion with integrity. In a later piece, I shall offer my own commentary on "Wonders of the African World." [More on this below]

When I first read Wole Soyinka's piece on the Internet suggesting that in being so overeager to comment on "Wonders of the African World," Mazrui lay himself to the charge of opportunistically using an attack on Skip Gates' series to raise the critical stock of his own series, "The Africans: A Triple Heritage," I wasn't sure that Soyinka was right. In principle the fact that one has written a book, or made a film, should not disqualify one from commenting on any future book or film which covers the same terrain as one's own book or film; all it does is impose on one the obligation to be extra careful of self-promotion and bias in commenting on a competitor's book or film. At the very least, such commentary should scrupulously avoid any reference to one's own book or film. Now it seems that beyond this general principle, Soyinka knows Mazrui well, and knows what he was talking about. For the most glaring aspect of Mazrui's two commentaries is the fact that in writing about Gates' series, the ONLY other documentary that Mazrui refers to is his own series; he does not mention a SINGLE other documentary film or filmmaker. And what is truly, truly amazing is that even AFTER Soyinka had raised his objections about Mazrui's motives in rushing so eagerly to attack "Wonders of the African World," Mazrui proceeded in his second commentary titled "Black Orientalism?: Further Reflections on 'Wonders of the African World'" to increase the use of himself and his series as the benchmark of his attack of Gates. At least FIVE times in this second commentary, Mazrui uses Mazrui to castigate what Mazrui sees as flaws and outright betrayals of the cause of Africa and Pan-Africanism in Gates' series; and two of these are direct references to Mazrui's series. How more opportunistic and self-promoting can you get? Declares Mazrui in one of these references to himself and to his series: "My TV series was standing on the shoulders of those Pan-African giants." The "giants" whose legacy Mazrui is claiming for himself

and his series are none other than Kwame Nkrumah and Edward Blyden. For any Africanist who has been in the profession for more than twenty-five years, it is supremely ironic that Ali Mazrui can in 1999 be claiming the mantle of Kwame Nkrumah when he is generally thought to have built his early professional career as a brash anti- Nkrumahist pandering to the Western interests who wanted Nkrumah and his legacy destroyed. I personally think that view of Mazrui is unfair and simplistic, but Mazrui certainly did much to earn it!

This last point brings me to the main substance of this initial commentary on "Wonders of the African World" and the critical discussion which it is generating. This is to caution that as much as possible we should strive to separate the messenger from the message, a distinction virtually non-existent, it seems, for Mazrui. As I read him, the "MESSAGE" of Mazrui's two commentaries on the series so far is as follows: Books and films on Africa by Africans and African-Americans should serve the interests of Africa, not those of its historic enemies; "Wonders of the African World" does not do that, it grossly distorts African history and traditions, and does so in the service of the enemies of Africa, specifically the Western world, and still more specifically "the white man.". Since I have not seen the Gates' series, I intend to keep this grave indictment in mind when I do so. For now, I can report that I didn't see any evidence of this indictment whatsoever in the one episode in the series that I saw in Gates' home in Cambridge, Mass in October 1998, i. e. before the broadcast of the series. [This is the episode on Ethiopia. More on this below]. But by what tenets of critical practice does Mazrui feel that he, Mazrui, should serve as the EMBODIMENT, the incarnation of that "MESSAGE"? In that same second commentary, "Black Orientalism?," nearly every instantiation of faithfulness to the cause of Africa against its enemies that Mazrui gives in order to cast Gates into racial perdition refers to - yes, you've guessed right, Mazrui! Indeed, this second piece by Mazrui on "Wonders of the African World" seems to come straight out of the pages of an annual "Mazrui Newsletter" that is solely written, edited, published, and distributed by none other than Mazrui himself. [I last read an edition of this publication which Mazrui sends to relatives, friends and colleagues about eight years ago; I do not know whether he still publishes it] This "Mazrui Newsletter," like the Carter Center at Atlanta Georgia, is a monument to egotism; it announces and celebrates every small and great incident in the life and activities of Mazrui in the given year of any edition of the newsletter, in the process unabashedly name-dropping all over the place on the high and mighty of all five continents. The following passage from that second commentary on "Wonders of the African World" could very easily have come from an edition of this solipsistic "Mazrui Newsletter":

I am a member of the OAU Group of Eminent Persons on Reparations for Black Enslavement. I and eleven others were "sworn-in" before the Presidents of Africa at a summit meeting of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Dakar, Senegal, in 1992. As an OAU Group of Eminent Persons on such a momentous topic, we are

supposed to explore the modalities and strategies of campaigning for reparations from the Western world for the enslavement and destitution of the Black people. Our Chair in the Group was the late Chief Moshood Abiola of Nigeria.

Now Skip Gates' television series virtually tells the world that the West has no case to answer. Africans sold each other. Presumably if there are to be any reparations in the trans- Atlantic slave-trade, it would have to be from Africans to Africans. Skip Gates succeeded in getting an African to say that without the role of Africans in facilitating it, there would have been no trans-Atlantic slave trade at all.

Now, everybody has the right to ANY mode of self-presentation to the world that they choose, but please let us draw a line between what properly belongs in the "Mazrui Newsletter" and what belongs in a piece claiming to represent critical discourse and intelligence in the cause of Africa and the black race. Let us distinguish, to the extent possible, between the message and the messenger. And for heavens' sake, let us avoid absurdly simplistic formulations of the cause of Africa and the black race! The distinct imputation in this quoted passage from Mazrui that membership on that "OAU Group of Eminent Persons on Reparations for Black Enslavement," or the mere fact of being sworn to membership of that group by heads of state of the African continent provides automatic access to intellectual rectitude and truth in matters affecting the black race is laughable, it is absurd! Indeed, there are those who would argue exactly the opposite, i.e. that the organs and institutions of the OAU, including those heads of state, are confounders of the cause of African unity and emancipation, and they would have powerful arguments to buttress their contention.

I mentioned earlier in this piece that I saw one episode in Gates' series in October 1998. I wish now to refer to this event in arguing that as much as possible, we should separate the messenger from the message. In the light of the current debate on "Wonders of the African World" it is supremely ironic that when I saw that episode on Ethiopia, I kept saying to myself that in the way that Skip Gates was so much in the film, metaphorically if not literally in every frame, in form if not in content, this was another "Mazruish" product! But I am going too quickly to the conclusion of this piece; let me back up a little to the circumstance of that event.

What happened was this. Skip Gates had invited me this late October evening to his house for dinner with his family, I should say for the upteenth time since we met in the mid-80s and became friends and later colleagues at Cornell. Gates had not informed me before this dinner that he was going to be screening this hour-long documentary film; I think he wanted it to be a surprise. The screening took place after dinner. About half way through it, I began to feel that this film meant a lot, a whole lot, to Skip. And that he was going to

be asking for my opinion of the film. I began to frame in my mind how to tell him that I felt the FORM of the film, in a very general manner, seemed very "Mazruish." The screening was barely over when Skip asked me what I thought of the film, confirming my distinct feeling throughout the screening that the man's emotional investment in the film was incalculable. I think I said something like "it is a very moving film" and Skip, obviously not satisfied by this said "m- f, tell me what you think!," to which I then said "is it a finished product, have you finished editing it?" I think that communicated to Gates that I didn't like the film because he replied gruffly that the editing was finished and done with, thank you, and discussion closed!

In point of fact, I did like the content of the film, perhaps not for the reasons Gates himself might have wished, but I shall leave my comments on the episode for the commentary I shall be writing on the whole series. I allude to this event in order to underscore the fact Gates is as invested in "Wonders of the African World," in as single-mindedly self-reflecting a manner, as Mazrui was/is in "The Africans: A Triple Heritage." Mazrui and Gates are driven, endlessly ambitious men whose passions as professionals and what can be called "race men" happen to be - Africa. Great works of art, of scholarship, of filmmaking are often produced by this kind of passion; so are works of incredible narcissism and opportunism; so also are works which are just good and are neither particularly distinguished nor unbearably flawed. The injunction that we keep the "messenger" from the message is informed by this awareness. This is made all the more necessary by Mazrui's misuse of the term "Orinetalism" in his critique of Gates. For in invoking and deploying Edward Said's seminal book, *Orientalism* in attacking Gates' series as pandering to Western racist interests, Mazrui ignores, deliberately in my opinion, the fact that Said makes it abundantly clear in his book that "Orientalism" was not, and could never have been, the creation of ONE man, of one DISCIPLINE, of one GENERATION of European "Orientalists." How then could Skip Gates, even if that was his objective as Mazrui wishes us to think, alone, and in one series, caused the "birth" of the so-called "Black Orientalism"? Edward Said knew better than to ascribe the "birth" of "Orientalism" to one man, because he knew that if he had done that his book would have been easily demolished. He also was not out in this book to demonize one person, but to critique a whole mode and style of thought and discourse.

I wish to be perfectly understood in this repeated dictum of separating the messenger and the message. It is not the mere fact that Mazrui and Gates are so pervasive, so intrusive in their respective documentaries that I find questionable, even though that does not sit particularly well with my own aesthetic and political sensibilities; rather it is the very fact that both men seem to see "Africa" or "African-America" as extensions of themselves, extensions of agendas driven by their single-minded pursuit of fame and celebrity, this is what I hope this debate should attempt to separate from the true merits and flaws, such as they might be, of Gates' series, indeed of ANY documentary on Africans and African-

Americans. Or put differently, it should be possible to show how this aspect of Mazrui and Gates produces, and is produced by, the merits and demerits of their respective series. This is a cardinal aspect of critical discourse, and it is an aspect which is very ill-served by Mazrui's brand of self-serving commentary.

I certainly hope that the debate will not be so focused on Gates and Mazrui that it will be forgotten that there are other documentary filmmakers on Africa and African- America around whose works are more professional, more independent and more challenging than either Mazrui or Gates, both of whose greatest contribution to African and African-American Studies are decidedly not in the area of documentary filmmaking. A group of scholars have given notice that they are starting a forum on the Internet to be called "West African Review" and they have invited contributions to a debate on "Wonders of the African World." My more substantial commentary on the series will appear in that forum, to be published in early December.

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